

# Gender Exaggeration as Trans

**Abstract:** Surprisingly, it follows from commonplaces about sex and gender that there is a widely-practiced variety of transgenderism achievable through sex/gender “exaggerating.” Recognizing exaggeration as trans—or at least its moral equivalent—has several important consequences. One is that, since most traditional cultures endorse exaggeration, trans lifestyles have often been mainstream. But more importantly, recognizing that gender exaggeration is trans (or its moral equivalent) reveals a number of sex- and gender-discriminatory practices and intolerant attitudes: from pathologizing hypergender to legally restricting androgenic hormones, many people who consider themselves trans allies are less consistent in their support of transgender lifestyles than they realize. Thus, seeing exaggerators as trans not only follows from a better grasp of transgenderism, but also reveals new arguments in favor of greater gender freedom against gender-policing by both conservatives and progressives.

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## 1. Introduction

We argue, first, that people who *exaggerate* their sex or gender can also be trans. This follows from standard and quite defensible positions in gender research and various conceptions of transgenderism. If our argument is sound, important corollaries follow for the philosophy of sex and gender. One is that since gender exaggeration is promoted in most traditional cultures, this sort of transgenderism in many cases is the cultural norm. That means conservatives and traditionalists must confront the fact that they often endorse a type of transgenderism. Another corollary is that a number of sex- and gender-discriminatory practices and intolerant attitudes suddenly become obvious upon recognizing exaggerators as trans: from pathologizing hypergender to legally restricting androgenic hormones, many people who consider themselves trans allies are probably less consistent in their support of transgender lifestyles than they realize. Thus, seeing exaggerators as trans—or at least the moral equivalent of trans—uncovers new arguments for greater gender freedom.

In the next two sections we make the ontological point that “exaggeration” transitions can be transgender if they are as extreme as transitions we currently recognize as trans. Sections 4 and 5 make the social-political point that conservatives and traditionalists appear to be pro-trans only in the case of those who exaggerate their gender, while progressives tend to be critical of trans exaggerators. In the final section we answer criticisms of our view. As we discuss there, our analysis of transgenderism, which allows some exaggerators to count as trans, is independent of our second point that, whatever we *call* sex- or gender-exaggeration, it is perfectly acceptable morally for *the same reasons* transgender lifestyles are acceptable.

We would like to make two notes before launching into our arguments. First, the vast majority of ethical writing on trans issues is found in medical ethics or feminist forums (e.g., Bettcher and Garry 2009 and other essays in that special issue of *Hypatia*; Murphy 2012; Wahlert & Fiester 2012, among others). This essay’s tone and approach is merely analytic, and doesn’t adopt a (specifically) feminist or therapeutic outlook, although our reasoning and conclusions are not at all inimical to either approach. Second, although the authors draw on examples from male and female, masculine and feminine experience, we focus somewhat more on male and masculine side of things because male and masculine exaggeration is particularly controversial. This essay is not an evenhanded survey of sex- and gender exaggeration, but rather justifies exaggeration on pro-trans principles. We thus use the most salient examples possible, which happen to involve hypermasculine and hypermale aspiration.

## **2. Sex, gender, and transgender**

Our case for seeing sex- and gender-exaggeration as trans is based on this argument:

1. Sex and gender should be seen as continua.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We ignore the complexities raised by sexual orientation, cultural and racial differences, etc., which justify a multidimensional space on which to map gender. Accounting for these with a richer taxonomy would, if anything, make our point more compelling.

2. One is trans when one willingly transitions significantly enough along at least one of these continua.
3. Sex- and gender-exaggeration sometimes instantiates a significant enough willful transition.
4. So some exaggerators are trans.

This section is devoted to supporting the first two premises.

Gender researchers often understand gender as a spectrum (Butler 1986 and 1990/1999). This supports our everyday impression that the categories of *man* and *woman* encompass immense variation: effeminate boys and men are nonetheless boys and men, and masculine girls and women are nonetheless women. More controversially, a wide middle of the gender spectrum is increasingly recognized as being populated by people who are neither boys or men nor girls or women. Availing ourselves of the distinction between one's gender *identity* (a relatively stable self-image) and one's gender *expression* (how one presents oneself at a given time), those expressing in the middle are often called "androgynous," and those falling between the identity categories of boy/man and girl/woman "genderqueer." These terms are very much in flux,<sup>2</sup> and have wide senses meant to reject both traditional genders without commitment to being "between" them (AP 2013). However, we will use them in their narrower sense here.

Whereas gender concerns psychology and societal presentation, sex is determined by the biological characteristics that make one a male or female: sex chromosomes, mammary glands, sexual organs, and a host of secondary sexual traits. Like gender, sex was once assumed to be binary. However, some biologists, prominently among them Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000; see Ainsworth 2015 for a helpful summary), have argued to great effect that the phenomenon of intersexuality demonstrates a missing middle between male and female.

While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many other bodies . . . that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 31)

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<sup>2</sup> In this field, any term is likely to strike future readers as offensive, much as how Peter Singer's use of "retarded" in his earlier work does to our current sensibilities. We ask for a charitable reading, and invite readers and commentators to substitute terms with equivalent reference as they see fit.

Intersexuality includes (among many other things) an insensitivity/non-production of sex hormones, hermaphroditism, micropenis, clitoromegaly (large clitoris), chimerism, and various syndromes caused by having extra sex chromosomes (XXY, XYY, etc.).

These notions of sex and gender give substance to transgenderism. “Transgender” is defined by the American Psychological Association as

an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth. (APA 2011)

And in their own authoritative definition, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination (GLAAD) define “transgender” as

an umbrella term often used to refer to people whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth. (GLAAD 2013)

In other words, on these analyses, transgenderism supervenes upon facts about 1) one’s sex assignment at birth, 2) one’s gender identity or expression, and 3) a nonalignment between these two things.

The APA and GLAAD analyses strike us as inadequate for the phenomenon they are meant to characterize. First, on these analyses, one wouldn’t be able to know whether one was trans or not if one didn’t know what sex one was assigned at birth. Or suppose a doctor categorizes Jack as female at birth, but after a couple years Jack’s parents realize he’s really a male and raise him as a boy. In that case, Jack would be trans according to the definitions above, but he’s not trans. Second, and more importantly, one’s status as trans doesn’t supervene on facts about one’s sex *and* gender. This can be appreciated if we consider cases where people want only to change their sex. Suppose Joe, a male who identifies as a man and chooses to perform in masculine ways, gets sex reassignment surgery to have a body that better matches his self-image as a female. Certainly Joe would be considered trans, transgender (in the wide “umbrella” sense intended by the APA and GLAAD), or

(more precisely) transsexual. However, there is still an alignment between his gender (man) and *the sex he was assigned* (male). So on the definitions above, he's not trans. But surely he is. So the authoritative definitions are both too wide (as Jack's case shows) and narrow (as Joe's case shows).

We can avoid these objections by stressing the “transition” aspect of transgenderism. We suggest analyzing transgenderism as concerning a *voluntary and significant transition from one sex or gender to another*. Voluntariness seems necessary to being trans: a person forced to undergo an operation changing their sex wouldn't be trans, we all would agree, nor would someone forced to assume a gender be correctly categorized as transgender (more on this later). In addition, we claim that a trans person must undergo, or at least desire, a “significant” transition from one sex to another.<sup>3</sup> A metrosexual man who shaves his chest probably shouldn't be considered trans, but our analysis is noncommittal as to how much of a change one must effect, or wish to effect, to be trans. We are also neutral on how much effort one must expend to change one's sex or gender. Some readers will argue for a high standard on which one isn't really trans unless one has actually transitioned. Others will say merely having an abiding, deep dissociation with the gender or sex one has had foisted upon them by society or fate is sufficient for being trans, even if one hasn't taken any steps to transition. What we say below is compatible with any view about this question, so we invite readers to tweak our analysis to suit their favored threshold.

### 3. Exaggeration and Type 2 transgenderism

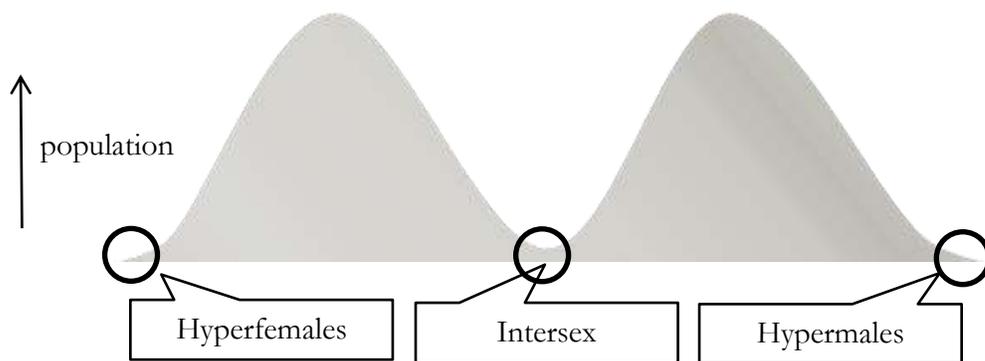
With these preliminaries behind us, we begin our argument for premise (3) by asking: What sort of person occupies the *poles* of these spectra of sex, gender identity, and gender expression? For surely if those less male or female, masculine or feminine than average should be represented on the continua above, so must those who are *more* male or female, masculine or feminine, than the rest of

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<sup>3</sup> We thus urge a *transition* theory of transgenderism as opposed to a *non-alignment* account. The transition theory is defended in the last section by way of a non-alignment objection to it.

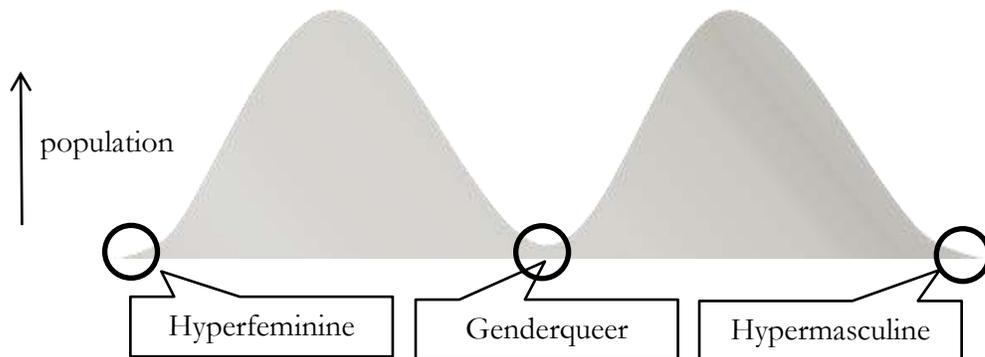
us. In fact, we have a duty to acknowledge such individuals. If it is immoral to ignore or dismiss intersex or genderqueer people, we simply don't have the right to wave off those who find themselves on the sex and gender extremes, either.

Let's start with sex. What would make a person be more male or female than the average male or female? As touched on above, a number of quite distinct physical structures and biochemical traits determine one's spot on the sex spectrum. Since those with less pronounced or fewer (fe)male traits are understood as being somewhere more toward the middle of the spectrum than the average (fe)male, it stands to reason that one is more (fe)male than the average (fe)male—is “hyperfemale” in the jargon (Lemley 2000)—if one has more of those traits, or those traits to a higher degree. For instance, if, as one trans scholar has pointed out, the shape and size of the “phallocitoris” matters to whether a person is considered male, intersex, or female (Costello 2011), then males with more developed and larger penises are more male in that respect. The same can be said of many secondary sex characteristics, such as muscularity, broadness of shoulders, depth of voice, prominence of cranial ridge and Adam's apple, squareness of jaw, hairiness, and so on (the reader is suggested to refer to French rugby player Sebastien Chabal for a sterling example of hypermaleness).



—Figure 1: Hypersex on the sex spectrum—

Similar thoughts apply to gender. Gender, like sex, doesn't terminate at the average masculine or feminine identity or behavior, but instead at rather extreme instances. So, take whatever makes an average (wo)man more (wo)manly than a genderqueer person, add even more of those things, and you get a hyperfeminine (hypermasculine) individual. It is unnecessary to subscribe to any particular view of *what* sorts of feelings, interests, attachments, affects, or behaviors count as hypermasculine or hyperfeminine at this stage in the argument: readers are welcome to supply their own gender stereotypes, and then to imagine more extreme expressions of them. Also irrelevant for present purposes is *why* some gender stereotypes are accurate: our argument for gender exaggeration as trans runs just as well whether it is nature or nurture that explains gender differences.

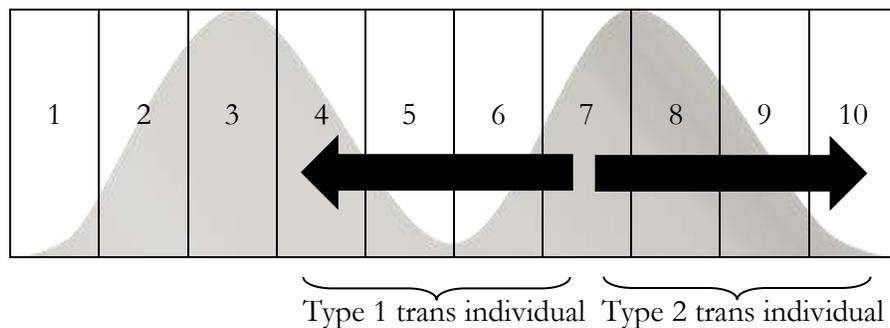


—Figure 2: Hypergender on the gender spectrum—

Now traditionally, “trans” is thought to refer to people whose gender identity or expression is somewhere on the *opposite* half of the gender spectrum as is typical for their sex (call these “Type 1” trans folk). Indeed, this assumption is why “cisgender” was adopted as the contrast class to “transgender,” “cis” being the Latin root meaning “this side of.” However, this conception of transgender assumes the validity of the binary paradigm, which recognized only two sexes and two genders. On that model, the only way you logically *could* be trans was to “cross” from male to female or vice versa (if “transsexual”) or from man to woman or vice-versa (“transgender” in the more limited sense). Understanding sex and gender in terms of a continuum renders that older conception

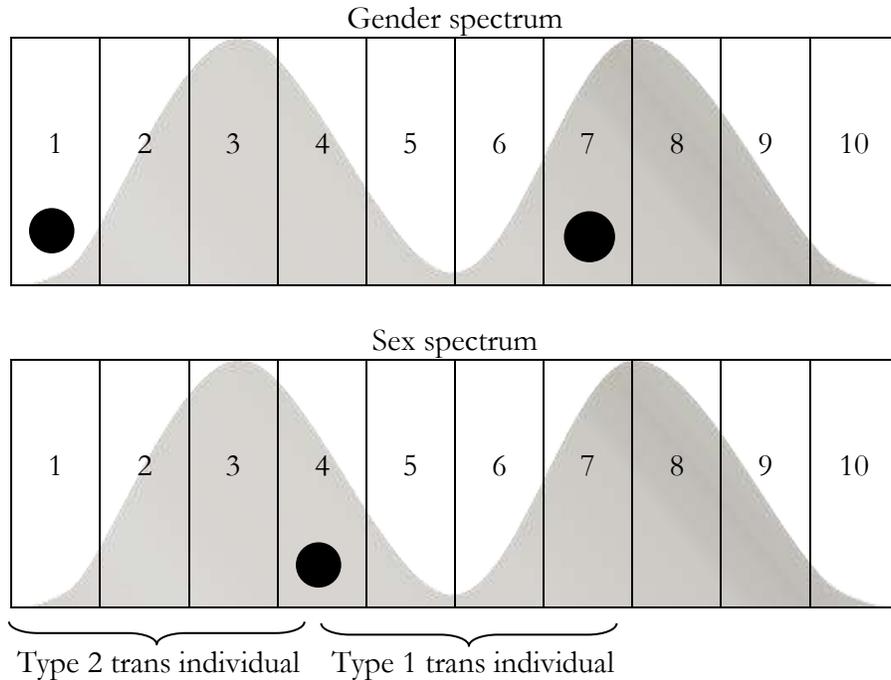
of transgenderism obsolete. For there is no reason to exclude “sex exaggerators” or “gender exaggerators”—i.e., those people who accept a sex or gender closer to the *nearer* pole of their old or unwanted gender or sex—from the extension of “trans.” Call the subset of exaggerators whose transition is significant enough “Type 2 trans.”

So if we take the continuum model of sex and gender seriously, a male or a man who wanted to be (significantly enough) more male or masculine would count as trans, as would a female or woman who wanted to be (significantly enough) more female or feminine. For instance, if we number various segments on these spectra and dispense with the old sex/gender terms, then we claim a “7-to-10” sex or gender exaggerator is no less transgender than is a “7-to-4” trans person, given their transitions are equally extreme.



—Figure 3: Two types of trans individuals on the “transition” model of transgenderism—

Figure (3) rejects the APA’s and GLAAD’s “non-alignment” model of transgenderism, which sees transgenderism as not identifying in a way “aligning” or “corresponding” to one’s position on the sex spectrum. But even *if* the non-alignment model is accurate, “Type 2” individuals must still be recognized as trans: “4s” on the sex spectrum who are “1s” on the gender spectrum are no less trans than “4s” on the sex spectrum who are “7s” on the gender spectrum.



—Figure 4: Two types of trans individuals on the “non-alignment” model of transgenderism—

#### 4. Traditional transgenderism

We have argued that exaggerators who make an equally significant transition as traditionally-understood trans folk (Type 1) are also trans (Type 2). How many exaggerators reach this threshold and count as Type 2 trans will be a matter of some dispute, since opinions on this question are sensitive to judgments about how dramatic transitions must be to count as trans. In any event, mere exaggeration is a familiar-enough phenomenon.

- *Superheroes*: It is very common for boys to dress up as superheroes, donning costumes with exaggerated pectoral and abdominal muscles and various forms of weapons with which to fight crime or super-villains in some sort of champion combat. Indeed, many of our highest-grossing film franchises are superhero tales (N.a., “List...”), and most of these stories involve a normal man being transformed into a super man (Superman, The Hulk, Spider

Man, Captain America, etc.). Incidence of real adult men fighting crime in superhero costume is steadily increasing (N.a., “Real-Life Superheroes”).

- *Makeup*: On a daily basis, hundreds of millions of women accentuate female secondary sex characteristics. Makeup makes the lips appear larger, eyes wider-set and bigger, and eyebrows more arched. Careful and painful waxing, shaving, and plucking accentuate female hairlessness.
- *Apparel*: Push-up bras make breasts appear larger, and specialized girdles help women achieve ideal hip-to-waist ratios. Shoulder pads in jackets are used to exaggerate male shoulders, and most male athletic gear is cut to give an illusion of wider shoulders and narrower waists.
- *Sports and beauty pageants*: On any given day on any number of playing fields, fathers can be found urging their sons on to ever more masculine performances, attitudes, and behaviors (“Man up!”). On the other end of the spectrum, participation in child beauty pageants is on the rise, a fact popularized by hit shows such as *Toddlers and Tiaras*, *King of the Crown*, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. In some of these shows, parents complete their daughters’ costumes with fake breast inserts.
- *Steroids and Synthol*: Annually, millions of men—most of them non-athletes—consume artificial androgenic hormones (such as steroids) to make themselves more muscular. Much newer and in its own way just as dangerous is the practice of injecting Synthol or similar oils under the skin to create instant, balloon-like “muscles.”
- *Augmentation*: Millions of women have had their breasts augmented for cosmetic purposes, and annually thousands of men are getting silicone implants to get a more muscular appearance in their calves, arms, and chests.

- *“Male enhancement”*: Products advertizing the ability to pharmaceutically enlarge penises are a multi-billion industry, and seem to be tolerated by conservatives (one—Extenze—sponsors a NASCAR team). Products promising to add volume to male ejaculate are important sources of ad revenue for pornography sites. And the devices used to stretch, suck, and “jelq” penises into larger shape would impress a medieval inquisitor.
- *Weaklings*: Charles Atlas (Angelo Siciliano) helped launch the bodybuilding industry with his narrative of having been a “97-lb weakling” who, upon having sand kicked in his face by a bully in front of his date, took up weightlifting. Cartoon ads portray him beating up his bully after his “transformation.” “Don’t be half a man,” another ad exhorts.

Gender and sex exaggeration is not only widespread, it is encouraged in traditionalist and conservative circles. Recall for example the triumphant conclusion of Rudyard Kipling’s “If”:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,  
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!

The suggestion is that becoming a “man in full” or a “real man” is a worthy but almost unattainable goal—a frequent theme in Kipling’s verse (Deane 2014). This yearning to realize a gender you are not is straightforwardly trans. Indeed, that one could be expected to strive to ever-higher reaches of a gender is a traditional belief in many places. To continue using masculinity as our stalking horse, it is well known that cultures typically set benchmarks for manhood normal males struggle to satisfy (David and Brannon 1976). Anthropologist David Gilmore’s seminal *Manhood in the Making* discusses this theme in detail, noting at one memorable point that,

among the nonviolent Fox tribe of Iowa, “being a man” does not come easily. Based on stringent standards of accomplishment in tribal affairs and economic pursuits, real manhood is said to be “the Big Impossible.” (1990: 15)

Why transitioning to the ends, but not through the middle, of the gender and sex spectra has been encouraged to such an extent is an empirical question. Plausibly, the explanation partially has to do with mechanisms of sexual selection combined with the fact that, in the hard circumstances in which our cultures evolved, particularly fecund women and doughty warriors were at a premium. Lifestyles, psychologies, and bodies in the middle of the gender and sex spectra were, all other things being equal, less useful for sustaining the tribe. The technological and social circumstances of modernity have now made warriorhood and fecundity almost irrelevant. Thus, the morally correct efforts of intersex and genderqueer/androgynous liberation movements are more likely than ever before to be successful. The question explored here, however, is how accepting we should be toward those among us who still pursue the sex and gender extremes.

Given the historical prevalence of people striving to hypergender or hypersex, who counts as cisgender on this model? We might say one is cisgendered if one doesn't wish to transition to a significantly different sex or gender from the one they've found themselves with. For example, if you find yourself a "3" on (say) the gender continuum, and at most wish to be a "2" or a "4" or somewhere in between, we may want to say you're a cisgender person. But since so many people in traditional cultures and even Western conservative subculture aspire to hypergender and hypersex status, there is good reason to suppose that transgenderism, and not cisgenderism, is the norm.

### **5. Discrimination against exaggerators**

If those exaggerators whose transitions are dramatic enough are "Type 2" trans, then a number of undiagnosed forms of transphobic attitudes, policies, and laws suddenly become obvious. For instance, criticisms of breast augmentation, male competitiveness, "jock" and "bro" culture, and celebrations of extreme manliness or femininity are easy to find in (usually progressive) forums populated by people considering themselves supportive of trans folk. Consider for example the mocking accusation that a man who body builds, drives a big truck, or collects guns is

“compensating for small penis.” Todd Hartley, a humorist for the *Huffington Post*, manages to combine two of these clichés into one paragraph to score his political point:

Do you remember a few years ago when people were buying millions of Hummers? To me, those Hummer owners were a lot like gun owners. They had an inflated sense of their own self-importance, and they thought owning a massive tank-like vehicle made them somehow more virile and masculine. Then the rest of us pointed out that owning a Hummer was an obvious sign of a person making up for a physical shortcoming, and Hummer went out of business virtually overnight. So, since I’m not particularly concerned about the National Rifle Association ruining my political career, I’ll be the one to say it: If you own multiple guns or feel the need to possess a military-style assault weapon, it’s because you have a small penis. (Hartley 2013)

Whatever your view about guns and big trucks, it is simply inconsistent with progressive or feminist values as we understand them to base one’s criticism of a gender expression or identity (even a hypermasculine one) on the basis of a physical trait. There is no moral difference between saying someone cannot be a man or shouldn’t perform in masculine ways because he has a vagina and saying someone cannot be hypermasculine because he lacks a large penis. (Imagine the outrage if a *Huffington Post* columnist mocked a female-bodied transgender man for driving a big truck, even though such female-bodied men are even less endowed than under-endowed male-bodied men.)

Hypergender discrimination manifests in psychological and pseudo-psychological diagnoses that mirror those once officially directed at Type 1 trans folk. For instance, Gloria Steinem and Lauren Wolf recently claimed that a “cult of masculinity” was working to promote rape culture (Steinem and Wolf 2012). In a follow-up piece meant to mollify readers outraged by the connection of rape to masculinity, Wolf writes:

The idea is that, while the majority of men are not rapists by any stretch of the imagination, some men become addicted to control, which is part of what we’re calling the “cult of masculinity.” [...] Many men, it seems, took our concept as a personal attack—as if talking about an *extreme end of masculinity* meant we were deriding them as an entire gender. We weren’t. I’ll repeat: Not all men are rapists or control-addicted. (Wolf 2012, n.p., emphasis added)

From the present perspective, it is perplexing that Wolf is “only” speaking out against men at the “extreme end of masculinity.” If it was wrong for society to connect vices such as cowardice or child

predation to people manifesting around the center of the gender spectrum, how can we justify literally defining an extreme end of the gender spectrum in terms of rape?

Consider, too, the DSM IV's Gender Identity Disorder, which most readers will agree wrongly pathologized Type 1 transgenderism. It is difficult to see why similar objections don't apply to the clinical meaning of "hyper-masculinity," which is characterized by (*inter alia*) a propensity to violent outbursts, a sense of male superiority, and homophobia (Mosher 1998; Peters et al. 2007). Obviously, a sense of male superiority or a propensity for rape is bad. But these vices shouldn't be seen as essential to hypermasculinity—a gender some people will find themselves with, and a gender we must grant (lest we accept transphobia in the starkest terms) people have a *prima facie* right to adopt.

## 6. Objections

*Objection from Counterexample:* "It is unintuitive to include exaggerators among trans folk, so exaggerators cannot be trans."

First, suppose that inference is correct. We may now label gender exaggerators whose transition is equivalent to a transgender transition in the opposite direction "supergender" instead of "transgender." Ignoring concerns about the historical differences between these two groups (e.g., such as that trans folk have been more discriminated against than have supergender folk), we see no morally relevant difference between "transgender" and "supergender" people. Thus, all the moral lessons we offered above would still apply: one cannot consistently accept supergender people and condemn transgender people, and one cannot consistently be an ally to trans folk while demeaning supergender people or expressions as such.

Second, it's just bad philosophy to conclude that an analysis—especially of a natural kind—is inaccurate simply because it is discovered to have an unexpectedly wide or narrow extension. It was surprising to learn that whales aren't fish, and that suns are stars. It is famously difficult to say

what distinguishes a surprising consequence from a counterexample when it comes to analyses, and we wish to remain neutral on that debate here. On our view, the essence of being trans is a substantial *transition* (actual, or maybe just wished-for) from one sex or gender to another, and that exaggeration sometimes involves such transitions. The dissatisfaction with one's body, shape, voice, dress, and comportment, and the extreme, often life-threatening measures taken by both Type 1 and Type 2 individuals to achieve their sex- or gender ideal are quite comparable, even if the social costs are not. So if it turns out that lots of people are trans on this model, that is not a terribly big bullet to bite: it turned out that there are lots more suns than we had anticipated, too.

*Objection from Marginalization:* “You’re simply co-opting the trans identity to make a point about gender freedom and inconsistencies in our attitudes to gender. You can (and should) make the second point without hijacking trans identity.”

We reply that, if being trans means abandoning, or maybe even wishing to abandon, the gender or sex one finds oneself with for a significantly-enough different gender or sex, then it logically follows from the continua model of sex and gender that exaggerators who wish to move an equivalent distance as Type 1 trans folk do, but in the opposite direction, are also trans. It would seem that the objector wishes to add another condition to being trans, perhaps that to be trans one must be “marginal” or “nonconforming” or even “oppressed” in some way. We find this proposal implausible and insulting. Suppose a virus sweeps through humanity and most people started to behave and feel in whatever way the critic thinks *is* trans: would everyone who was trans cease to be trans the next day? Our intuitions say no—the majority would just be trans.

As to “hijacking,” it is worth comparing the claims of this paper to a point routinely made by anthropologists with regard to race. Instead of the usual strategy for undermining racism which involves accepting and embracing biological *difference*, the standard anthropologically-informed tack is to point out the biological *superficiality* of racial differences in the first place (AAPA 1996). We say the

same of transgenderism: a “typical, cis” teenage boy pushing himself to be more manly by artificially lowering his voice or nurturing a struggling mustache is as trans as he would be if he were curling his hair and wearing eye shadow. Of course, demonstrating that the differences used to justify some form of discrimination are phony isn’t—and shouldn’t be read as—making the case that the discrimination suffered by the relevant outgroup hasn’t been grave.

*Objection from Non-alignment.* “You say that being trans essentially involves a ‘willful and significant transition from one sex or gender to another.’ But take someone who was born biologically male, but who always wished to express and live as a girl/woman, and furthermore was fully allowed to and had that choice respected and acknowledged. Since she didn’t *transition*, this person is not trans on your definition. But surely she is trans.”

This case is underdescribed. Suppose Anna is male-bodied (say, an average “7”) but has always identified/expressed as feminine as possible, and, although she has always been allowed to be and express as a woman, she nonetheless regrets her male body and wishes she were female-bodied. Our definition, interpreted to include wished-for transitions as transitions, would cover Anna, since she wishes to be more female (say, a “3” on the sex spectrum above) than she can manage for whatever reason. In contrast, Bree is biologically male (say, a “10” on the above spectrum), *wishes to remain male-bodied*, but has always expressed and felt like a girl and woman (and was allowed to live as so). So although Bree is built like a football linebacker and wears sun dresses and makeup, she’s happy with her situation. Yes, on our analysis Bree (a much rarer sort of person than Anna, it’s worth pointing out) is not trans, since she hasn’t transitioned and doesn’t wish to. Nor do we find this result counterintuitive, since we are fully persuaded that being trans necessarily involves some sort of sex or gender *dissatisfaction*.

But suppose we’re wrong about our analysis of transgenderism, and that we should amend our definition to subsume people such as Bree:

trans = referring to a willful and significant transition from one sex or gender to another, *or* having a gender identity that doesn't align with social expectations for one's sex.

As the italicized “or” suggests, the second clause here is only a sufficient condition. (If Carol goes from being a “7” sex and “7” gender to a “3” sex and “3” gender, she would have been perfectly sex-gender aligned both before *and* after her transition, yet she would be trans nonetheless.) But as argued above, even if we restricted our attention to the “non-alignment” model of transgenderism, our claims about exaggeration would hold, since some exaggerators wish to be (significantly enough) more masculine or feminine than their bodies suggest to their culture (Figure 2).

*Objection from Bad Expressions:* “You cite examples of gender and sex exaggeration such as steroid and Synthol use and child beauty pageants. Are you saying that as trans allies we cannot object to such things?”

Not necessarily. We advocate for a middle path. The *gender freedom extremist* rejects any criticism of a person's sex or gender choices. This is obviously incorrect: some cultures require males to stalk and kill an innocent person from another tribe, village, or gang to earn their manhood. This practice is wrong, and it would be wrong if it were a rite of passage for womenhood or genderqueerhood, too. More common is the other ditch of *sex/gender discrimination*, which criticizes a segment of sex or gender continuum as such. Some people seem to be less tolerant of those in the middle of the sex and gender spectra, and some less tolerant of those at the extremes. Sloppy identification of genders with expressions is rampant in both camps: if some hypermasculine men have hostile attitudes toward women, we should criticize *that*, not their hypermasculinity, on the very reasonable assumption that hypermasculinity can be realized through morally sound behaviors and attitudes. *Mutatis mutandis* for hyperfemininity and gender identities in the middle of the gender continuum. In the absence of some extraordinary evidence to the contrary, we should be highly dubious of claims to the effect that a segment of the gender spectrum is itself morally problematic.

Consider an analogy with race. Is it a theoretical possibility that some populations are more prone to be criminal, cowardly, rapacious, etc., than others? Yes. But theoretical possibilities are cheap; and given what we know about environmental influences, we should assume that any disproportionate distribution of some vicious trait across populations is attributable to culture, not biology. And even if this assumption should be empirically disproven, our response should be to help people within that population battle that inherited propensity, not to morally criticize the group itself. The same should hold for genders and sexes, be they 1's, 3's, 5's, 7's, or 10's.

*Objection from Corrupt Genders:* “Okay, we take the lesson that it’s not morally wrong to be hypermasculine or hyperfeminine as such. However, the ways these segments of the gender spectrum are realized in our culture are morally corrupt. For instance, suppose hypermasculine men really are statistically more prone to be rapists. Then, if one just happens to find oneself being hypermasculine, one should shy away from that gender until it is realized in a morally sound way. And *a fortiori* one shouldn’t aspire to be hypermasculine—one shouldn’t be a masculine ‘exaggerator’—because that is tantamount to deliberately placing yourself in a more morally problematic circumstance.”

We reply that, even in a culture in which some stereotypical hypermasculine or hyperfeminine expressions are morally noxious, there will likely be many moral ways one can realize these genders (say, by being even *more* extreme in one’s performance of the morally sound qualities that make one masculine or feminine in that culture). In such cases, it is hard to see what is wrong with being, or exaggerating into, a hypergender. Consider this analogy: in fact, poor people commit more violent crimes than rich people do. So is it morally problematic to be poor? No. Is it morally problematic to choose to be poor—to “transition” into poverty by giving all your money away—just because by doing so you’ll be putting yourself into a class of people who commit more crime? Of course not.

*Objection from voluntariness:* “You claimed transitions must be voluntary to be trans. But if it’s true that traditional cultures put pressure on young men and women to exaggerate, then insofar as they are successful, these people shouldn’t count as trans, because they didn’t transition voluntarily. Thus it isn’t true that type-2 transgenderism is the norm in such cultures.”

We maintain that a sex or gender transition can be voluntary despite a certain amount of social pressure, and certainly despite even significant social rewards. Nonetheless we do concede that perhaps a great deal of traditional transgenderism hasn’t been voluntary—the anthropological facts, plus our judgments about voluntariness, would decide that matter. Thus it may be false that transgenderism is the norm in the typical traditional culture that pushes men to be more manly and women to be more womanly. In a modern liberal society such as ours, however, it seems that Type 2 transgenderism is sufficiently voluntary, and, given the ubiquity of its gender exaggeration, probably far more common than Type 1 transgenderism.

## **7. Conclusion: a plea for comprehensive gender freedom**

This essay is more about sex and gender freedom than it is about transgenderism. Although we feel our arguments about the nature and scope of transgenderism are sound, the larger point is that we have a *prima facie* right to occupy, and to transition into, any point of the sex- and gender spectra. Although usually ignored, this plausible principle covers hypergenders and hypersex, and any otherwise moral expressions of these sexes or genders. The commonness of Type 2 transgenderism speaks strongly against pathologizing hypergender and hypergender aspiration. And there is no detectable reason to morally condemn exaggeration, either: if it is morally permissible for a male-bodied woman to have breast implants to realize her wished-for sex identity, it is morally permissible for a female-bodied woman exaggerator to do so as well. If it is permissible for a female-bodied Type 1 trans man to take dangerous hormones to help him be more male, then it is morally

permissible for a male-bodied Type 2 exaggerator to do the same. Similar thoughts apply to gender and any morally permissible gender expression.

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